

What is this 'Christmas' you speak of?

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Christmas has come around on base, but the Elites have no idea what is going on. Luckily, Master Chief and a very chirpy Marine are on hand to help them make sense of it all. This leaves one question hanging â€“ will Chief and the Arbiter be on the 'naughty' or 'nice' list?

The Arbiter strode down a corridor in the human base, Rtas 'Vadum at his side, with a look of bewilderment on his face. The corridor was currently being decorated by the UNSC soldiers on duty with chains of small, multi-coloured flashing lights and glittery threads of gold and silver. Most seemed in good spirits and some were singing along to the human 'music' playing over the intercom system, so cheerful the Arbiter could see 'Vadum shuddering in disgust.

Occasionally a soldier would turn from the chaos, see them coming and call out to them, saying phrases such as "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy Holidays!". The Arbiter returned these greetings with a nod of his head and 'Vadum with a grunt as they continued toward the Operations Room to. Neither understood the madness that had taken over the base during the past few days, so were heading to the Ops room for an explanation, but they were both sure that this insanity would not have spread to the commanders.

How wrong they were.

They reached the doors to the Ops room, and as they swooshed open, all four of the Arbiter's jaws opened in shock. The Ops room had been decorated with exactly the same objects in the corridor, but in addition, there was also a large green tree placed in the middle of the room, so tall that the top was just touching the ceiling. The bottom half of the tree was completely covered in the same lights and glittery thread, but also had a large number of brightly coloured balls hanging from it, while the top was relatively bare, with the odd piece of thread or ball placed on it.

The Arbiter wondered if the tree was supposed to look that different in each half, until he noticed a couple of Marines trying to throw the balls at the top half of the tree. Most of them fell straight to the floor, but a few became stuck on the branches, explaining to the Arbiter why the top half was so sparsely decorated compared to the bottom — the humans couldn't reach the top, and obviously didn't currently have the means to reach it either.

The Arbiter heard footsteps approaching from his left and turned to see Master Chief heading towards him, carrying what appeared to be a very large ladder. It was indeed a very large ladder, and the Arbiter could guess what it was for. A large cheer went up as the Marines noticed Chief come in with it, and Chief quickly dumped the ladder next to the tree before walking back towards the Arbiter, who had only just noticed that 'Vadum had disappeared off somewhere. It was probably so he could try to make sense of what was going on in peace and quiet, as he liked to do if he was very confused.

"Merry Christmas," Chief grumbled to the Arbiter, whose reply was a confused look. Chief's head tilted to the side as if in consideration, before saying "You have no idea what's going on, do you?" to which the Arbiter replied by shaking his head. With a sigh, Chief signalled the Arbiter to follow him over to a quieter corner of the Ops room, and he began to explain what the hell was going on at the base.

"Basically, every year we humans celebrate a festival in December called 'Christmas'. We decorate our buildings with a pine tree, lights and tinsel. And on the 25th, we all spend to day doing nothing, eating too much, and giving each other presents to show how much we like each other. We also give cards, but the presents are the most important thing — if you give someone a really crappy present, then they think you don't like them much, and so you'll get a crappy present in return. Got that?" The Arbiter nodded.

"But I still do not understand why you celebrate this holiday. It seems useless. Why have a specific day for giving gifts, and not do it any other day?" Chief shrugged.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. I've never really done Christmas before and I don't see any point to it, although it seems everyone else in this base does. I just take it as an excuse for a day off, though to be honest I would rather be out there trying to end the war!" Chief trailed off, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, before he began walking to the door. As soon as it had closed after him, a rather bubbly and excited Marine ran over to the Arbiter.

"So, did Chief just tell you about Christmas?" He asked, and the Arbiter nodded in reply. "Did he tell you about Santa too?" The

Marine noticed the look of confusion that was becoming pretty permanent on the Arbiter's face at the moment, his jaw dropping in surprise. "He didn't tell you about Santa? But that's the best part!" The Marine exclaimed with glee, before explaining this 'Santa' idea.

"So, he told you about the presents, right?" The Arbiter nodded in reply. "But he didn't tell you about the guy who delivered them? The Arbiter shook his head. "Basically, he's a fat jolly guy in a red suit that drives a sleigh pulled by magical flying reindeer, who comes down your chimney to place the presents his elves have been making all year under your tree." The Arbiter just looked at the Marine as if he had lost his mind.

"You really believe that?" He asked in shock. The Marine's expression dropped slightly.

"Why? You don't think Santa's real?" The Marine looked as if he were about to cry at this statement, and that was the last thing the Arbiter needed right now.

"Um, of course he's real! I was, er, just making sure you weren't trying to make a joke, see, because I don't understand human humour much." The Arbiter lied. The Marine's expression changed to one of glee again and he bounced back over to the tree, hanging yet more decorations on the already crowded bottom half. The Arbiter let out a deep sigh and shook his head. Humans and their ideas could be so weird sometimes. But he decided if he was going to be at this base, he might as well join in the madness and experience a different culture. He made his way back to his room, already thinking about what presents he could give.

The Arbiter was awoken a couple of mornings later by a vigorous shaking. His eyes drifted open to see the overly happy Marine he had encountered the other day, whose name he had learned was Private Mitchell, shaking him to wake him up, and became aware of the shouts of "It's Christmas, it's Christmas, and Santa came! You have to see all the presents!" The Arbiter let out a grumble of acknowledgement and Mitchell let go of him so he could sit up and properly wake up. He had barely got on his feet before he was pulled along by the Private, who was constantly talking about food, presents and Christmas song, into the Ops room, where underneath the tree a massive pile of presents lay, seemingly at least one for every member on the base.

Mitchell gave a squeal of delight before letting go of the Arbiter to charge down to the tree to begin looking for any presents for himself. The Arbiter casually wandered over to where Chief was leaning against a wall, looking completely disinterested with the whole thing. There were Marines everywhere, calling out to others and passing presents around. Even the Commander, Miranda Keyes, was amongst the chaos, trying to direct it and give it some order. The Chief made a small huff of greeting to the Arbiter, which he returned with a nod of his head.

"Look at it. It's madness. This is one of those strange moments when I get an idea of what you might see when you look at our species." Chief said. The Arbiter replied with a grunt. He continued to watch the events with Chief in silence, until he noticed Mitchell coming towards them with two presents.

"Hey, both of you have a present each â€“ I found them especially for you! Merry Christmas!" The Arbiter gave the Private what he hoped was a grateful look, while Chief just gave him a nod. Mitchell wandered back into the crowd, and the Arbiter looked at the present he had been handed. It was wrapped in shiny red paper, with a huge gold bow on the top and curls of golden ribbon as decoration. Someone obviously put a lot of effort into this he thought. Carefully unwrapping the paper, the Arbiter was surprised to find a human book in his hand.

He had had some lessons on how to read English so it was easier for Human commanders to communicate with him via messages, and he could just about read the title â€“ 'The Night Before Christmas'. He opened the cover and saw a small message written on the first page: 'I thought this might help you understand our different traditions, or just serve as proof to you we are all insane. Chief.' The Arbiter turned to look at Chief beside him, who shrugged, seemingly embarrassed.

"I thought you might be interested to learn more about Christmas. You seem to have enjoyed the past few days at base."

"That's very considerate of you. Thank you." The Arbiter said, and Chief diverted his gaze to the present in his hands. The wrapping was nowhere near as spectacular as on the Arbiter's present, just a few sheets of shimmering purple paper stuck badly together with tape. Chief still took the time to open the present carefully and seemed confused when a metal shape fell into his hand. Upon closer inspection it seemed to be the hilt of an Elite energy sword, though something was carved into the handle in Sangheili. It was pretty obvious who this present was from, though he was intrigued as to why he had received it and what it said.

The Arbiter had apparently read his mind. "I was told by someone that the present should be something special. The carving on the hilt says 'Hope'. I thought it seemed to fit you â€“ you are not only a sign of hope for the human race, but now also for the Sangheili race. Without you, we would not be in the position we are today, and would still be following the lies of the Prophets. We would not have hope of a better future."

Chief listened and remained silent for a moment afterwards, before saying "You really are getting too into this holiday. And I just tried to encourage you even moreâ€|. It was then the Arbiter noticed Mitchell standing beside them with tears in his eyes.

"That was so beautiful!" He exclaimed, "Whoever thought that a race that tried to wipe us out and only seem to enjoy violence and killing could come up with something that sounds so amazing! Aw, I love you guys!" With that, Mitchell through his arms around Chief and the Arbiter and pulled them into a huge hug. The Arbiter tensed at first, but then relaxed. After all, he might as well enjoy this holiday while it lasted. Chief howeverâ€|. Well, the Arbiter was sure he was already thinking of different ways he could painfully remove the Private from himself.

A few hours later, most of the base had gathered in the Rec room for drinks. Currently most of the Marines were passed out, as were a couple of ODSTs, while Chief and the Arbiter were locked in a deadly

serious drinking competition, both being cheered on by equal numbers of Marines. Chief was holding out pretty well, but it could be seen that the alcohol was beginning to get to him. The Arbiter however was still going strong. He had warned at the start that Sangheili booze was a lot stronger than humans, but Chief was confident he could win. He would regret that statement in the morning.

Finally, after 20 pints of overly-alcoholic eggnog, Chief fell to the ground as his legs gave out. The Arbiter let out a roar of victory, before falling down next to Chief in a fit of giggles. A booming voice came over the intercom at that moment.

"Attention, all personnel, attention! A Covenant fleet has been detected within this section of the galaxy, and a Quick Response Team is requested immediately, including Master Chief and the Arbiter. Report to your posts now!" At this point, Chief and the Arbiter were the only ones left awake, and after the announcement finished they both burst into hysterical laughter.

"I'm gonna go -hic!- kick those Covies back to where they came from!" Chief said, attempting to stand up but falling on top of the Arbiter as he couldn't hold his own weight. This made the Arbiter laugh even more.

"I think this is the Covenant's attempt at sending you a present!" He said, and there was a pause before Chief and the Arbiter broke into hysterics again over the absurdity of the idea. Chief slowly calmed down and let out a deep sigh, before his head dropped forwards and a snoring sound started to come from his helmet. The Arbiter lay in the near silence for a while still giggling to himself before his eyes eventually drifted shut and the only sound left in the room was Chief's snoring.

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